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Saving face: Don't let your cosmetics cause health problems

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We turn to cosmetics to look our very best, but sometimes all that lathering, slathering, powdering and painting can do more harm than good. Certain ingredients in personal care products can cause redness, itching, swelling, acne and other reactions in people who are sensitive to them. Preservatives, fragrances and dyes are common culprits. Some people are allergic to specific ingredients, but more commonly the problem is irritation, which can happen to anyone. Either way, it's wise to keep an eye on the ingredients you're smearing on your skin.

"The bottom line is that if you get a rash, you just have to stop using that product, and when you go to the store to buy another lotion, compare the ingredients and make sure they're not exactly the same," said Dr. Ella L. Toombs, a Washington, D.C.-based dermatologist and former office director for cosmetics and colors at the Food and Drug Administration. "Or go to a dermatologist to see what component might have been causative."

Ingredient lists often look like gobbledygook to consumers, so it takes research and experimentation to identify the offending substance.

Christopher Drummond, who developed bad acne during the eight years he worked as a print and catalog model, said it was through trial and error that he determined his makeup's mineral oil was to blame.

"Mineral oil does work well to bind the ingredients together, and it feels good, but it's very pore clogging," Drummond said. "It's like putting plastic wrap over your face."

Hoping natural products would be better, Drummond turned to dye- and preservative-free mineral makeup, but found it made his skin itch — which he traced to bismuth oxychloride.

Drummond, who last year launched his own organic-based cosmetics line under his name, said navigating the ingredient minefield can be overwhelming, so to simplify, he has made a list of five substances he avoids at all costs.

His hit list includes artificial colorants, artificial fragrance, petroleum (such as mineral oil), parabens (a widely used preservative) and phthalates (often found in fragrance to help hold scent).

Unfortunately, reading the product label doesn't always tell you everything that's inside.

While the FDA requires companies to list all intentional ingredients, it doesn't require them to list byproducts, such as formaldehyde, or the ingredients in fragrance, considered trade secrets. Fragrances can contain dozens of ingredients, many of them irritants, but all that's listed on the label is the word "fragrance."

Consumers also should be wary of products marketed as "natural," "organic," "dermatologist-tested," or "hypoallergenic," as the FDA doesn't have standards for those claims and doesn't require companies to substantiate them.

Even "fragrance-free" doesn't always mean what it seems: the product may contain fragrance ingredients to mask an unpleasant odor.

While the FDA prohibits the marketing of adulterated or misbranded cosmetics, the agency doesn't test or approve cosmetics before they go on the market (with the exception of color additives).

It's up to the cosmetics companies themselves to make sure their products and the ingredients in them are safe.

To that end, the Cosmetic Ingredient Review, an independent panel of experts funded by the industry trade group Personal Care Products Council, reviews some 250 ingredients each year to determine their safety.

If the panel finds an ingredient causes irritant or allergic reactions, it recommends a limit on the concentration that's considered safe and disseminates the information to manufacturers, said CIR director Alan Andersen.

Common ingredients that are known irritants include sodium lauryl sulfate, used to produce the lather in soaps and shampoos, and quaternium-15, a preservative that releases formaldehyde and can cause allergic reactions, Andersen said. The CIR has set concentration limits on both.

A chemical found in most hair dyes called paraphenylenediamine (or p-phenylenediamine, or PPD), is another common allergen. It can be particularly dangerous when used in dark henna tattoos, as extended exposure to the skin can cause scarring, Andersen said.

Some health advocates worry that, in addition to causing irritant or allergic reactions, certain ingredients may be harmful long term.

The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, a coalition of nonprofits including the Breast Cancer Fund and the Environmental Working Group, has fingered parabens, which mimic estrogen and have been found in breast cancer tumors, and phthalates, which are linked to male reproductive problems, as particularly worrisome.

The FDA says the levels of lead, parabens and phthalates found in cosmetics are so low they wouldn't pose a risk, but activists worry about the cumulative effect of using multiple products.

"We're concerned about the repeated chronic exposure to these chemicals," said Stacy Malkan, co-founder of the campaign and author of "Not Just a Pretty Face: The Ugly Side of the Beauty Industry."

Malkan's best advice to consumers: "Simplify. Choose products with fewer ingredients, and choose fewer products overall."

► INGREDIENTS TO WATCH FOR

Dr. Ella L. Toombs, a Washington, D.C.-based dermatologist, offered a list of some ingredients that can be problems.

- Quaternium-15 (a formaldehyde-releasing preservative)
- Fragrance
- Hair dyes: p-phenylenediamine; toluene-2; 5-diamine; p-aminophenol
- Lanolin (a lubricant)
- Cocamidopropyl betaine (found in some bath preparations)
- Eye makeup: Parabens (methylparaben, ethylparaben, propylparaben, butylparaben); nickel; cobalt; chromate
- Facial makeup: D&C red, No. 19, 31, 36
- Eye cream, lipstick: D&C yellow No. 11
- Nail polish: Tosylamide formaldehyde resin (sometimes causes eyelid rashes when people scratch their face)

► LEARN MORE

cosmeticsinfo.org: Search ingredients at this site sponsored by the industry trade group Personal Care

Products Council.

cosmeticsdatabase.com: The nonprofit Environmental Working Group's Skin Deep database evaluates the safety of thousands of products and ingredients.

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